AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKSONG AND AMERICAN CULTURAL POLITICS

The Lawrence Gellert Story

BRUCE M. CONFORTH

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African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics

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Bruce M. Conforth

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For Lawrence Gellert, his life and work,
and for Dick Reuss, who opened the door.

Contents

Series Editor's Foreword

Bruce Conforth's *African American Folksong and American Cultural Politics: The Lawrence Gellert Story* is a fascinating exploration of the convoluted life of an early folk music collector. Beginning his recording on a homemade machine in the mid-1920s, Gellert was perhaps the first person to make field disc recordings of African Americans—possibly as much as a decade before the Lomaxes. Although Gellert's work is little known today, during the 1930s the Communist Party used portions of his collection—those they considered African American "protest" songs—to promote its political agenda.

Through a detailed examination of Gellert's life, based on a cache of private papers, archival research, and myriad interviews, Conforth has uncovered an amazing story of an individual who might not have brought together protest songs, but who actually documented hundreds of African American work songs, blues, and spirituals and a variety of oral genres. In the process of uncovering Gellert's mostly secret life, Conforth explores the role of the Communist Party in cultural transmission; the lives of a variety of individuals who promoted and supported Gellert, including his brothers; and how Gellert's collections have been used by scholars to tell a flawed story. This exploration of the life and scholarship of Lawrence Gellert adds an important understanding of the role of field collectors and the organized left in the 20th century, and is a crucial addition to this series, which includes Richard and JoAnne Reuss's *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, Bob Coltman's *Paul Clayton and the Folksong Revival*, and Scott Barretta's *The*

Conscience of the Folk Revival: The Writings of Israel "Izzy" Young, who happened to know Gellert.

Ronald Cohen, Series Editor
American Folk Music and Folk Musicians

Acknowledgments

This book has taken nearly thirty years to complete. Over that time dozens of wonderful people have contributed in one way or another to its completion. A goodly number of these inspirational individuals are no longer with us, and so I would like to begin by expressing my profound thanks and appreciation not only for their contributions to this project but also for gracious ways they shared their lives. Frank Gillis was, more than any other person, responsible for starting me on this journey. I still recall the day in 1980 when, as director of Indiana University's Archives of Traditional Music, he asked me to transfer onto archival tape a number of disc recordings that were made in the 1930s by a man named Lawrence Gellert. I was amazed by what I heard on the strange discs that played from the inside out and wanted to know more about the recordings and the man. Soon after, Frank asked me to meet with Helen Brand, then claiming to be Gellert's widow, on my next visit to family and friends in New York City. He informed me that Helen had more of Gellert's material that he wanted me to gather for deposit in the archives. This was, one could assume, a classic case of being in the right place at the right time. But had it not been for Frank's interest in, kindness to, and support of a late-blooming graduate student (I had returned to school after an eight-year hiatus), this book would not exist.

Helen Brand, who was actually the ex-wife of playwright Millen Brand, initially led me down many blind alleys in my quest to know about Gellert, her male "friend" for several years until he "disappeared." I cannot fault her for this since she was only trying to look after her own best interests. To the memory of Helen and especially Frank, I offer my most heartfelt gratitude.

Otto and Hugo Gellert, Lawrence's two older brothers, were incredibly valuable in providing me with information about Larry's life as well as giving me their collection of his manuscripts, notebooks, letters, documents, recordings, and even his Presto recording machine. Without the material they provided, as well as their own rich stories about Larry's life, this book could not possibly be what it has become.

Lawrence Gellert was nothing if not a ladies' man. There were a number of former lovers who added great context to his story. Alice Lightner Hopf, his girlfriend in Tryon, North Carolina, whose family gave Larry their old phonograph to convert into his first recording machine, provided me with myriad tales about Larry in that area during the 1920s. Her testimony and documents helped prove the early date of Larry's first field recordings. She was a wonderful informant, and I miss our communication. Similarly, Ymske Tyssen Ebenstein, Louise Kates Tamotzu, and Edith Segal all provided unique insights into Lawrence Gellert as a person.

As I became more involved in this project, Frank Gillis was replaced by Tony Seeger as director of the archives at Indiana University (IU). Tony, following in Frank's path, was incredibly supportive of my research and my release of two records from the Gellert collection: one for Bill Nowlin on Rounder Records and the other on Bruce Bastin's Heritage label. I am very grateful for their friendship and involvement in my work. Bruce Bastin was also very helpful in discussing the songs from Gellert's collection.

There is no way that I can repay the debt I owe to Richard Reuss. Dick was the first modern scholar (and a fellow IU alumnus) to become involved in the Gellert story and conducted two interviews with him in 1968. He wrote and delivered perhaps the first conference paper on Gellert, and wrote about him in his doctoral dissertation, published later as *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957*. For the brief few years that I was honored to know Dick and his wife, JoAnne, I can honestly say that few researchers would have been so forthcoming in providing me with material from their own collections. Dick was a kind, generous, thoughtful, incredibly intelligent scholar who added great depth to my work and great companionship as a friend.

In conducting my research I had the good fortune of being able to interview and correspond with many other scholars and friends of Gellert. Among them, and to whom I owe a great debt of thanks, were Anthony Buttitta; Earl Conrad; Harold Courlander; Leonard de Paur; Hugh Ford; John Greenway; John Hammond Sr.; John Houseman; Alan Lomax;

Lorraine Brown; Arnold Rampersad; Diane Baumann and Pepsi-Cola USA; Earl Robinson; Pete Seeger; Elie Siegmeister; O. A. Diakonova of the Lenin State Library, Moscow; Izzy Young; Arlo Guthrie; and Irwin Silber. Doug Seroff provided wonderful comments on the spirituals Gellert recorded. Other scholars also played important roles in helping me complete this work. Steven Garabedian's 2004 doctoral dissertation "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Blues Music, White Scholarship, and American Cultural Politics" and his subsequent 2005 *American Quarterly* article "Lawrence Gellert, 'Negro Songs of Protest,' and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s," both of which utilized portions of my master's thesis and research, helped renew interest in Gellert's collection. Sam Charters and Dick Weissman published works discussing Gellert, and Dick especially put forth the call for a book about Gellert's life to be completed. For this prodding I am extremely grateful. Alan Wald graciously read and made suggestions on the portions of this work dealing with the history of the American left and Communist Party. Without his aid those sections would be woefully incomplete. Stephen Berrey read and commented on my discussion of the nature of protest within African American folksong and the ways in which other scholars had interpreted that concept.

A very special thanks, however, must to go to Herbert Halpert, whose wonderful recollections about Gellert provided some of the most important information in this book. It was an honor to have known such a generous and open scholar. Penny Gellert Freeman, Larry's niece, provided the photographs for the book, as well as a great deal of personal family history. Her contribution was invaluable and I cannot thank her enough for her support.

Institutional thanks must go to the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, for access to their Lawrence Gellert Collection, and to George Mason University for access to their Works Progress Administration oral histories collection, Collection #C0153, Special Collections and Archives. Many thanks also to Judith McCulloh for continuing to encourage this project through the years.

Ronald Cohen is not only a great friend, scholar, and prolific author but also served as an outstanding developmental editor. He provided conscientious reading of my chapter drafts, which were quickly returned with outstanding suggestions on how to make each section read clearly and make Gellert's story as interesting and informative as possible. His exhaustive knowledge of so many facets of the material discussed in this book enriched the final project beyond my expectations. No writer

could ever ask for a better editor, friend, and confidant. Bennett Graff, senior acquisitions editor for Rowman & Littlefield/Scarecrow Press, was always encouraging, patient yet persistent, and a great aid in every step of this project. To Bennett and the staff at Scarecrow Press, I express my deepest thanks.

Finally, I thank my partner, Pamela Kittel, for her continued reassurance and confidence that my manuscript would actually become a book. Her constant queries of "How's the book coming?" tempered by her ongoing support, allowed me to believe in myself and the reality of the book. I cannot offer her enough of my gratitude.

Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon in the fall of 1980 I found myself standing before a first-floor apartment at 148 Sullivan Street in New York. The first thing that struck me about my surroundings was the number of locks that secured whatever lay before me. No less than four padlocks and one door lock clicked in anticipation. It was as though all those guardians were necessary to protect some grand treasure inside. My excitement grew until the door finally swung open. Rather than treasure, the rooms were much like the ex-resident's older brother would later describe them, "a filthy rathole."[1] There were a few creature comforts—a wrought-iron bed, a dresser, a room that resembled a bathroom—but more important, scattered throughout were piles of papers, notebooks, records, commercial texts, instruments, and who knows what. Making the mess look even more pitiful, and dangerous, was the fact that everything was covered by a thick layer of grime.

The apartment had belonged to Lawrence Gellert, who had recently "disappeared." The person allowing me entry, Helen Brand, conducted herself with an air that was as mysterious as the apartment itself. The widow of screenwriter Millen Brand (winner of a Best Screenplay Oscar for the Olivia de Havilland movie *The Snakepit*), she had, upon our first meeting, claimed to be Gellert's widow. Gradually she changed her story to being his "close friend," and then finally to "caretaker" of his materials, apparently without official approval or denial from Gellert's family. The exact nature of their involvement was never made quite clear, but she had been, if nothing else, Gellert's woman friend during the last years of his life. Further trips to the scene would make it obvious that Brand was primarily interested in ascertaining what items

of Gellert's might be of some value so she might sell them for her own advantage. She was right to think there was treasure there, but it was not easily found, nor was it the kind she could easily sell.

The grime that covered everything was a perfect metaphor for Gellert's life. Tremendous information colored by misinformation, vaguery, jealousy, political intrigue, and outright lies. It was no wonder that there were so many varying opinions about Gellert's work, and so many misrepresentations. Even though at the time I probably knew more about his life than any other scholar, I also made numerous errors in my master's thesis and on the two record albums of his material I released in the mid-1980s. I simply had not sifted through the grime adequately. So now, after nearly thirty years of research, it is time to introduce the man of whom I speak.

The story of Lawrence Gellert, in order to maintain any level of objectivity and truth, must be told not just by Gellert but also by those who can corroborate, or contradict when necessary, his self-invention. It is for this reason that I include many quotes. Only in this way can the life of a human chameleon be pieced together, for that is exactly what Lawrence Gellert was. But rather than a lizard that changes its appearance to blend into its background to escape detection, Gellert repeatedly changed his appearance to attract attention. In exploring Gellert's life through his own words and unpublished documents, as well as the words of those who knew him best (some of which could only be published after their authors' deaths), I have found that much of what scholars thought they knew about him was wrong, and that he was, more often than not, a victim of his own insecurities and attempts to build self-respect. The latter led him, unfortunately, to being used by members of the American left: initially through the urging of his own brother, who was clearly aware of the potential to manipulate Gellert and his collection. It also led him to become someone who did as his critics claimed—fabricate some of the more political material in his collections. On a more positive side, the great majority of his material is indeed genuine: he collected many more folksongs and folk narratives than anyone knew. The known extent of his work has been limited to a few articles, two small texts containing selected songs from his collection—all carefully chosen to supposedly represent the theme of protest—and three record releases. Yet his role in the history of folksong and folklore collecting is larger than perhaps any could have ever imagined.

The name Lawrence Gellert is still not a familiar one. The overwhelming majority of people have never heard of him. There are only

a few who might even recognize the last name Gellert, and if they do it is probably his brother, the radical artist Hugo Gellert (who gained renewed fame as one of the "witnesses" in Warren Beatty's epic 1981 movie *Reds* about author, labor organizer, and early 20th-century American communist John Reed). A few scholars, however, have recently resurrected Lawrence's name and work, generally focusing on African American folksongs and his association with the American left of the 1920s and '30s. Although Gellert's collection received sporadic mention after his heyday in the 1930s, folklorist Richard Reuss in the 1960s was the first scholar to actually interview Gellert and to devote considerable attention to his work. Reuss "rediscovered" Gellert while he was doing research on folksong and the American left wing and communism. Reuss's work with Gellert focused almost exclusively on Gellert's political involvements, and although Reuss produced several wonderful interviews with him, Gellert was not above embellishing his actual political involvement. Reuss used Gellert's interviews, as well as considerable additional scholarship, to produce his 1971 doctoral dissertation published in 2001 as *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957*.[2] In this important work Reuss traced the relationship between the American Communist Party and folk music, discussing such major folk music figures as Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Aunt Molly Jackson, Josh White, and others, including six pages on Gellert. The 1930s was a time when communist and other so-called leftist groups used the voice of folklore and folksong with great zeal, certain that capitalism was nearing its end. Reuss is highly objective in his descriptions of the left's original misunderstanding of the African American music that was available to them. Spirituals, jazz, and blues, the left believed, were all "insufficiently militant and corrupted by bourgeois influences,"[3] and this caused the left's original failure to successfully harness the folksong movement for their agitprop (agitation and propaganda) purposes. In discussing the left's appropriation of Gellert's "protest" material, Reuss represented only the portions of Gellert's life and collection he chose to tell him: often contradictory, occasionally invented, and interspersed with larger elements of truth.

Like Reuss, I first "met" Lawrence Gellert as a graduate student at Indiana University. I was an ethnomusicology/folklore major working at IU's famed Archives of Traditional Music. In the fall of 1980, Frank Gillis, then director of the archives, looking for a project to assign, handed me a few boxes of metal disc recordings and larger acetates. He told me to "see what I could do with them" because the depositor's

widow had written him a letter wondering what might be their future. The boxes contained many of Gellert's recordings and some of his notes. The material had been gone over at least once before by another, earlier student, but it was determined that there wasn't much to be done with them. The metal discs were almost indecipherable. They contained scratchy noise occasionally punctuated by the sound of someone or a group of people singing, or perhaps a guitar being played. Every so often what was on these discs would seem to match what Gellert had written on a little paper label glued to the middle. There were blues, spirituals, and other songs, but none that were complete enough to really serve any solid research purpose. His acetate recordings, made a decade later, were of an entirely different quality. Playing from the inside of the disc toward the rim, these recordings had excellent fidelity and were amazing in their content: blues, spirituals, work songs, ballads, and so on. It was decided that I would go to New York City and meet with Gellert's widow to see what else could be collected or learned, and that is how I found myself standing before his vacant apartment, waiting to be the latest to turn a new page in the story of his life and work.

In some ways, Gellert's material was like King Tut's tomb. On the one hand it was full of treasures, but on the other it seemed to carry a curse. My original attempts to secure information about Gellert were highly guarded by Helen Brand, who, as mentioned, originally claimed to be Gellert's widow, then his companion. She provided the information that I used for my 1983 master's thesis—"Laughing Just to Keep from Crying: Afro-American Folksong and the Field Recordings of Lawrence Gellert."[4] At that time Brand denied that Gellert had any living relatives, and would not allow me access to any documentation or material (recordings, audio tapes, notebooks, etc.) other than what she permitted me to bring back for deposit in Indiana's archives. I cannot fault Brand for the stories she told me, for in all likelihood, much like Gellert, she saw the potential for making some profit and was willing to reinvent the parts of his life that she did not know. I can, however, assume blame for many misconceptions of Gellert's life that I accepted, without question, from Brand's stories. This is one of the main reasons I have now relied so heavily on quotes and other primary sources. This time Gellert's story is told the way it always should have been.

The first oft-repeated error about Gellert's life and collecting is that upon moving to the South, he immediately took up residence with an African American woman, thereby giving him "membership" in that community. This was an important myth because it allegedly helped

explain how Gellert could gain access to African American songs available to no other collector. The truth is that Gellert did not live with an African American woman but employed one to do his washing. These are vastly different concepts: one providing an esoteric view of a community, the other maintaining an exoteric perspective. Another error is the dating of the recordings. There is no question that Gellert began recording in the 1920s, but the songs that were released on the Timely and Rounder albums, as well as the two records I would eventually produce, were not done until the 1930s. Gellert privately pressed eighteen of his songs for a 1970 album, *Collection of Lawrence Gellert's Negro Songs of Protest*,[5] appropriating the name of then defunct Timely Records for use as his own label in this project.[6] Problems with printing the album cover prevented more than forty copies of the record from ever being issued. In 1973 Rounder Records rereleased this same material under the title *Negro Songs of Protest: Collected by Lawrence Gellert*.[7] Released in cooperation with Indiana's Archives of Traditional Music, this albums almost certainly owes its existence to the influence of Dick Reuss. In 1982 I released an additional twenty-four of Gellert's songs on Rounder Records as *Cap'n You're So Mean*: *Negro Songs of Protest Volume Two.*[8] The Library of Congress named this production one of the "Outstanding Folk Music Records of 1983." A third recording that I assembled for the English Heritage label, *Nobody Knows My Name: Blues from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia 1924–1932*,[9] shared less good fortune. Although initially greeted with enthusiasm, that interest stemmed from the dates upon which I based the recordings: 1924–1932. While the recordings with 1932 dates could indeed be correct, the others could not have been recorded before that time. Their fidelity is such that they had to have been recorded electronically on acetate disc, and such discs and recording technology were not available (and even then they were rare) until the very late 1920s. Because so many of the song titles, and even the discernible sound, of Gellert's first aluminum discs corresponded to material on the acetate discs, I erroneously attributed the songs to the same dates. It is important for me to finally correct any false impressions these errors may have produced, for they helped create even more questions about Gellert's collection and helped delay his true story from being told.

After completing my master's thesis and releasing the two recordings of Gellert's songs, I decided, in 1984, that I would attempt to write a book about his life and work. By then I knew that his two brothers, Otto and Hugo, were still alive, and that there were other family members,

ex-lovers, friends, associates, and scholars who knew Gellert and who might contribute to his story. I began to contact people and conduct interviews, but Otto Gellert was by far the most important contact I made. Prior to Lawrence's disappearance in 1979, he made sure that Otto took possession of what he considered to be his most important material: additional recordings (almost all spirituals or blues), notebooks, letters, manuscripts, even the Presto recording machine that he used from the 1930s through the early 1960s. Believing that he had found a kindred spirit, Otto graciously gave me these items over a period of a year and a half. Combining what I was discovering through Gellert's own words with the recollections of so many primary informants, I began to complete the picture of a man who had previously been a cipher. It also added much to my knowledge of the veracity of many of Gellert's "protest" recordings. It was precisely this latter bit of information, however, that necessitated putting the entire project on hold, for several informants would provide me their stories only on the condition that I not publish them until after their deaths. And so the story of Lawrence Gellert remained an unfinished project. As years passed, I would find some new piece of information, some new individual who knew Gellert, and some new scholarly work that mentioned him.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, based largely upon the recordings and my thesis, several books were issued telling a different story of Gellert's life than had previously been accepted. In 1986 Bruce Bastin, in *Red River Blues*,[10] misinformed by the liner notes on the Heritage album, attributed four pieces (as identified in the liner notes) to 1924. Nine other titles, however—that may in fact have been recorded in the early 1930s—sound, according to Bastin, much like the Star Band, centered in Atlanta. This group of changing personnel could have easily been recorded by Gellert as there is clear evidence (both from his own writings and from residents corroborating his story) that he was in this vicinity during these years. Bastin also noted that the singer of a piece titled "Black Woman" "sounds remarkably like Jesse Wadley who was in Bellwood Prison in Atlanta" in 1934 (five years after the original, erroneous attribution date). This time, context, and location are entirely congruent with Gellert's recording travels, and so Bastin's hypothesis may be correct.[11]

In the 1993 work *Nothing but the Blues* edited by Lawrence Cohn, John Cowley rightfully raised questions about the dates of Gellert's recordings that had thus far appeared on commercial disc and correctly stated, "Aural and other evidence indicates, however, that all the items

issued from his collection were recorded electrically . . . first developed in the early 1930s, and it is likely that Gellert's surviving recordings date from that time."[12] In 2004, blues expert Samuel Charters published "Lawrence Gellert and Negro Songs of Protest" in his text *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writing, 1956–2004*, in which he expressed his own skepticism concerning some of the lyrics.[13] Dick Weissman added to the Gellert story with his fine work *Which Side Are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America*. Weissman devoted several pages to a section of his text he called "The Strange Career of Lawrence Gellert." Drawing on my own master's thesis on Gellert and Reuss's work, Weissman retold what had already been briefly known about Gellert's life and work, but importantly suggested five possible reasons for Gellert's relative obscurity:

1. The songs in his collection contradicted stereotypes concerning "the passivity of African-American singers and songs."
2. He refused left-wing demands that he not use the word *nigger* in his texts and conform to party political correctness.
3. He feuded with both John and Alan Lomax, America's preeminent folksong collectors.
4. He sued folksinger Josh White when White's *Chain Gang* album used songs that Gellert claimed were from his collection and that he therefore owned songwriting credits.
5. He ultimately alienated Irwin Silber, cofounder and long-time editor of *Sing Out!* magazine and "one of the most important figures in left-wing song circles."[14]

Weissman's work is largely responsible for my book finally being produced, for Weissman made a basic plea: "One would think, with the extensive research being done into the blues and African American music, that someone would publish a book devoted to Gellert's life and a collection of his songs."[15]

Finally, in the March 2005 issue of *American Quarterly* Steven Garabedian produced the most comprehensive overview of Gellert's work thus far in print: "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, 'Negro Songs of Protest,' and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s."[16] This article was drawn from Garabedian's doctoral dissertation "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Blues Music, White Scholarship, and American Cultural Politics."[17] Using sources from my thesis, Reuss's 1960s interviews with Gellert, archival material, and

his own interviews, Garabedian presented a masterful account of the communist and left-wing use of folksong. He was also the first in print to recognize the important role blues played in Gellert's collection. Garabedian's article likewise analyzed these songs and placed them within their historical context, and I am indebted to him for mentioning my own work within his text. Garabedian, Weissman, and even Reuss did not have access to many of Gellert's unpublished documents, however, nor were they able to interview the people most able to either corroborate or refute Gellert's claims: his two older brothers, Hugo and Otto; his many lovers; his Federal Theatre and Federal Writers' Project coworkers; and other friends. Garabedian's work was not begun until most of these people had passed on, and neither Weissman nor Reuss focused specifically on Gellert. They, and other scholars who mentioned Gellert in passing, were almost certainly unaware that Gellert actually created protest songs, and they had only hints as to the totality of his work. Unfortunately, Gellert created a tunnel vision of his collection, purposely disallowing access to it and thus robbing himself of far greater respect and renown. Garabedian, Reuss, and the other scholars who have written about Gellert assumed that his collection, although impressive, was somewhat one-dimensional: that Gellert was only interested in protest songs for propaganda and that this treasure trove of never-before-nor-since-collected protest songs was actually valid in every respect.

There are at least five important aspects of Gellert's life and collection that previous authors appear to have either been unaware of or did not fully investigate:

1. Gellert was actually not especially interested in politics. He originally wanted to be an actor and performed in a few small parts on Broadway around 1920, and wrote plays or was otherwise involved in the theater his whole life.
2. He was not originally interested in protest songs but rather was struck by the beauty of Negro folksongs and spirituals. It was only at the urging of *New Masses* editor Mike Gold and Gellert's brother Hugo, radical artist and art editor of *New Masses*, that he turned part of his attention to this genre of song.
3. When the left urged Gellert to collect protest songs for their propagandistic value and he saw that he could find notoriety, and even fame, by doing so, he did, as many of his critics suspected, at least assist in the creation or writing of some of the material he recorded.

4. Despite his later protestations that he was not a folklorist and was not interested in anything other than protest songs to be used for propaganda, he actually had a deep affinity for Negro folk music and folklore and collected folklore of the northern and southern Negro, collecting and annotating perhaps the largest collection of Negro "Irishman" tales, as well as folk remedies, sayings, beliefs, and proverbs.
5. He was never a political activist in the manner most believe: he was never a labor organizer, never a member of the Communist Party, and used the left for his own advantage as much as they used his collection for their purposes.

There are even more side streets to the Gellert story that have not yet been told: his affair with British heiress Nancy Cunard, his work for Pepsi-Cola during World War II visiting army camps and making small records of soldiers for them to send home, his unauthorized publication of several of Eugene O'Neill's earliest plays, and his position as a suspect in one of the most newsworthy child abduction cases in New York City history, which eventually led to his disappearance. His life and collection were incredibly complex. Because scholars such as Reuss and Garabedian have done such exemplary jobs of relating the history of the left and folk music in America, I will only summarize their discussions in general and expand the discussion where new material is being presented.

Those familiar with Gellert's work believed that it consisted in a very either/or manner. Either it was a collection of African American protest songs unlike any collected by other folklorists, or it was material he concocted in order to help prove a point: that African Americans were a proletariat on the verge of becoming organized as a movement. The scholarly research on Gellert included mention in a few books on the blues[18] and some references to him with regard to protest music, the left wing, and the folksong revival.[19] Despite these works, Gellert, as a man, was a cipher. Virtually nothing had been known, or published, about his life, the circumstances that led to his collection, and his subsequent years as a quaint anomaly, a strange, forgotten footnote in American cultural history. This lack of life narrative led researchers, including myself, to make many erroneous assumptions about him and his work, and to travel down many blind alleys.

Although this book contains material about what I, and a few others, believe to be one of the most important collections of African American

folksongs of the 20th century, it is not a folk music book. Likewise, it contains much material about the oral narrative tradition and genres of the African American community, but it is not a folklore text. Its documentation of the WPA Federal Theatre and Writers' projects, as well as its story about the American political left, might tend to make it a cultural history text. But it is not that either. Rather, it is the story about a man, his life, and his journey through all these realms: his successes and failures, high points, as well as times of complete invisibility. It is the tale about how America of the early 20th century shaped his life, just as he continued to reinvent himself (something America was doing to itself as well). And finally, it is about how that man was consumed by an America that had become strange, alien, and frightening to him: an America that made him, quite literally, disappear, much like his work had done before him.

NOTES

1. Otto Gellert. Letter to the author, June 5, 1985.
2. Richard A. Reuss. "American Folklore and Leftwing Politics, 1927–1957." Unpublished dissertation, Indiana University, 1971.
3. Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000, p. 93.
4. Bruce Michael Harrah-Conforth. "Laughing Just to Keep from Crying: Afro-American Folksong and the Field Recordings of Lawrence Gellert." Unpublished master's thesis, Indiana University, 1983.
5. Lawrence Gellert. *Collection of Lawrence Gellert Negro Songs of Protest*. New York: Timely Records, TI-112, 1970.
6. The original Timely Records was the brainchild of insurance salesman Leo Waldman. Founded in 1935, it was the first company to specialize in issuing records that supported left-wing causes.
7. Lawrence Gellert. *Negro Songs of Protest: Collected by Lawrence Gellert*. Sommerville, MA: Rounder, 4004, 1973.
8. Lawrence Gellert. *Cap'n You're So Mean: Negro Songs of Protest Volume 2*, ed. Bruce Harrah-Conforth, Sommerville, MA: Rounder, 4013, 1982
9. Lawrence Gellert. *Nobody Knows My Name: Blues from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia 1924–1932*, ed. Bruce Harrah-Conforth, Heritage Records, HT-304, 1983.

10. Bruce Bastin. *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

11. Bastin, *Red River Blues*, p. 67.

12. John H. Cowley. "Don't Leave Me Here: Non-Commercial Blues: The Field Trips, 1924–60." In *Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, edited by Lawrence Cohn, 265–311. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993.

13. Paul Oliver. *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writing, 1956–2004*, New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2004.

14. Dick Weissman. *Which Side Are You On? An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival in America*. New York: Continuum, 2005, pp. 28–29.

15. Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?* pp. 28–29.

16. Steven Patrick Garabedian, "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, 'Negro Songs of Protest,' and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s." *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2005), pp. 179–206.

17. Steven Patrick Garabedian. "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Blues Music, White Scholarship, and American Cultural Politics." Unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, September 2004.

18. Notable among the works on blues music that contain reference to Gellert's material are Bruce Bastin's 1995 *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (University of Illinois Press); Lawrence Cohn, ed., *Nothing but the Blues: The Music and the Musicians* (Abbeville Press, 1993); Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); David Evans's *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (DaCapo Press, 1982); Paul Garon's *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (City Lights, 1996); and "Lawrence Gellert and Negro Songs of Protest" in Samuel Charters' *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writing, 1956–2004* (Marion Boyars Publishers, 2004).

19. Notable among the works on protest music, left-wing politics, or the folksong Revival that contain reference to Gellert's material are Dick Weissman's *Which Side Are You On?* (Continuum, 2005), Richard A. and JoAnne C. Reuss's *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics* (Scarecrow Press, 2000), Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (Verso, 1998), Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 1977), Ronald D. Cohen's *Rainbow Quest* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good* (Harvard University Press, 1996),

R. Serge Denisoff's *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1972), Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and John Greenway's *American Folksongs of Protest* (Octagon Books, 1970).

Chapter One

The Cultural Front and the Negro

The Political Context of Emergence for Lawrence Gellert

Lawrence Gellert was one of the most misunderstood and overlooked folksong and folklore collectors of the 20th century. In truth, the fault for this misunderstanding and omission was mostly his own. He began collecting African American material purely by happenstance only to find the songs he transcribed and recorded used by the American left and Communist Party of America in ways that would cause other trained collectors to question the veracity of virtually all of his published work. Add to this the incredibly early date at which his collecting and recording commenced (the 1920s) and the criticisms heaped upon him—some out of sheer jealousy, some from a misunderstanding of the scope of his work—that caused most scholars to ignore him, and today he is merely a footnote. In order to fully understand the life and collection of Lawrence Gellert, therefore, one has to start by understanding the cultural context from which he emerged. To do that, one must first look at the growth of the American left and its relationship with African Americans and their culture.

Neither Lawrence Gellert nor his work might have been known if it had not been for the workings of what cultural historian Michael Denning has labeled the "cultural front." This movement began in the early part of the 20th century when young writers and artists of all media began creating an alliance between three groups: the moderns, the émigrés, and the plebians.[1] The radical moderns, according to Denning, were part of the new American renaissance of artists who came of age during World War I. Although some had already formed connections with the left through exposure to the radicalism found in New York's

Greenwich Village, many were at first apolitical, finding their conversion during the war, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the 1929 stock market crash, or any number of other events. The émigrés were artists and intellectuals who were antifascists, fleeing Europe and seeking to explore their Marxist leanings in America. The plebeians were a new generation of artists and writers from the working class. From these three groups would emerge the leaders of the cultural front: people like Langston Hughes, Sherwood Anderson, Stuart Davis, John Houseman, Michael Gold, and Hugo and Lawrence Gellert.[2]

It is not my intent to provide new information about the history of the American left and its relationship to African Americans, folklore, and folk music. Authors such as Richard Reuss, Steven Garabedian, Dick Weissman, and others have, as I will discuss, documented this history in great depth and with fine detail.[3] It is important, however, to provide at least an overview of their findings and a brief history of the growth of the left in America and its relations with the African Americans in order to provide the context in which Gellert operated, and to create a common vernacular with which the complete story of Lawrence Gellert can be told.

The cultural front was the product of the left's "powerful, indeed . . . unprecedented impact on U.S. culture in the 1930s."[4] The left of the 1930s, when Lawrence Gellert was at his collecting peak, was a much broader amalgamation of people, groups, and ideologies than is often considered. It was not centered solely on the Communist Party, although all its manifestations and its "fellow travelers" were certainly a part of it. Likewise, it was not the Socialist Party, the IWW, the NAACP, nor the AFL and the emerging CIO. It was largely white but not exclusively so. It was a mixture of young artists, writers, intellectuals, radical moderns, antifascists, anarchists, immigrants, unionists, and others who, if not members of any of the aforementioned groups, at least shared sympathies with them.

Before the American Communist Party, American socialism had its roots in such movements of social dissent as abolitionism, agrarian reform, numerous utopian communities, populism, nascent labor unions, and the early socialist sects of the 1880s and 1890s. Although differing in theory, approach, and success, they all benefited from the ability of America to deal with, and sometimes even embrace, political diversity, even in the extreme. Late 19th- and early 20th-century American socialism, while never becoming a true political force, demonstrated that European sociopolitical theories could be integrated into a uniquely American idea. Socialism in the United States usually traces its roots to

the founding of the Workingman's Party of America in Newark, New Jersey, in 1876. It was renamed the Socialist Labor Party in 1878. A confederation of American Marxist groups, it was particularly strong in New York City among Jewish, Finnish, German, and Hungarian immigrants. Around the same time—1886—the American Federation of Labor was formed in Columbus, Ohio. The relationship between the AFL and the Socialist Labor Party was a tense one at best, since the AFL was a more conservative organization, concerned primarily with unionism, working conditions, pay, and control over jobs, whereas the socialists, although concerned with those issues as well, also sought significant political goals. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) formed in 1898 as an offshoot of several groups (including the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, the Scandinavian Co-operative League, the Metal Polishers and Buffers' Union, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, and the Chicago Labor Union Exchange) and became a prominent movement in America under the leadership of Eugene Debs. The SDP and disaffected members of the SPA merged in 1901 and formed the Socialist Party of America. Claims by the American Socialist Party that it had ten thousand members when it was formed were probably an exaggeration, but by 1912 the party mustered 897,000 votes for president of the United States, a surprising 6 percent of the total votes cast.[5]

At the same time that socialism was setting its roots in America, the African American agrarian population was beginning its own forms of labor-related social organizing. The Colored Farmers' Alliance was organized in Texas in 1886, and although a semisecret society (disallowing historians from creating a clear understanding of its activities), it seems to have promoted "cooperation, resistance to monopolies, and a more widespread distribution of land and property."[6] Apparently the alliance was successful in helping organize a cotton pickers' strike as early as the summer of 1891. A similar strike had been attempted in Mississippi in 1889, and while both strikes resulted in widespread violence, they nevertheless served as some of the earliest indicators of labor radicalism among African Americans.[7] The IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) was founded in Chicago in 1905 at a convention of two hundred socialists, anarchists, and radical trade unionists, formed, at least in part, due to its opposition to the AFL's vision that the capitalist system was the path to the betterment of labor. Members of the IWW believed in nothing less than promoting worker solidarity in the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the employing class.